Beach water polo makes its debut in Gwangju
Russell McKinnon, FINA Media Committee

Gwangju, South Korea, July 13.— Differing styles, the struggle with converting from seven a side to four a side, made for some interesting matches of the opening day of the FINA World Championship beach water polo tournament at the Nambu University Grounds in Gwangju.

Beach water polo — without the beach, sand and surf.

However, teams were making waves as they enjoyed the free-flowing style, the smaller goals, the shorter and narrower pitch without the single referee breathing down their necks.

The small pitch is anchored in the middle of the men's pool and is quickly erected and decommissioned, making it the perfect venue for the sport worldwide, whether you have a pool, a beach, a river or a lake.

The game is fast, just three field players and a goalkeeper. The possession time is 20 seconds and there are two halves of 10 minutes' actual time.

Substitutions are frequent, although the introduction of flying subs, as recently introduced to sevens water polo, would make the attacks faster and more dynamic.

The teams displayed various styles with some attacking quickly and others still playing the other game, dropping legs when goals were scored instead of crashing back on defence.

These are the first international matches at this level and this tournament is being used as a demonstration sport only.

For the record, where results are not the key issue in Gwangju, France beat Argentina 22-8 and Canada defeated China 24-14 in the men's competition.

In women's play, United States of America bounced China 27-10 and Spain had the better of Australia 17-10.
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This was the first time we talked about actual strategy. We never put much time into it. Here we talked a little about it. We've never played in a course this size or goals this small. We were making adjustments from the very first minute forward. We have a very sharp group. When they came out of the water they had ideas. It makes my job a little bit easier. Pretty collaborative," he said.

French coach Nenad Vukanic learnt some of his beach water polo tactics from watching the women's match beforehand. "I saw something from the girls' match where on contra-attack hesitating taking the shot led to a contra-attack at the other end. It comes to a fast conclusion and you must not hurry and make sure you score. Making a lot of fakes and a miss can lead to a contra-attack."

He said it was the first time his team had played this style of game and that there were a lot of turnovers and you don't have time to celebrate the score."

He sais it could be the way of the future, but not the same as normal six on six. "It's a little bit difficult. When one team is a different class it is hard to stay in the match. If my (seven-a-side) team plays Italy we might resist for three-quarters of the match but here (four-a-side) it is not possible to catch up."

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Australia found the more agile Spanish a handful, however, both teams played the style required, including not hanging around for the penalty shot.

Morgan Baxter the Aussie team captain, revelled in the match. "It's a really interesting style — fast and intense. There is no time to warm up. You have to be ready to go from the start. There is less emphasis on tactics, more technical. You have to be aware and use everything you've got. It becomes quite hard. You have to be ready to go at all times."

With the comparative smallness of the pitch, she said that when you drive, "you take three strokes and that's the end".

Aussie head coach Taryn Woods, a 2000 Olympic champion, said: "We had a couple of hit-outs with some under-18 boys at home and then a short scrimmage against the Chinese here (in Gwangju). The game itself is not too different, but we expected the Spanish to be fast and mobile — this form of the game suited their style of play."

She said "there was no time to breaststroke and no corner to have a breather".

On Sunday, there are just two women's matches — USA v Australia and Spain against China.

The next men's matches are on Monday.